

Things Which Cannot be Shaken



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A SERMON

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Things Which Cannot be Shaken

BY DR. JOWETT

"Things which cannot be shaken."—*Heb. 12:27*

THERE are seasons in life when everything seems to be shaking. Old landmarks are crumbling. Venerable foundations are up-heaved in a night, and are scattered abroad as dust. Guiding buoys snap their moorings, and go drifting down the channel. Institutions which promised to outlast the hills collapse like a stricken tent. Assumptions in which everybody trusted burst like air-balloons. Everything seems to lose its base, and trembles in uncertainty and confusion.

Such seasons are known in our personal life. One day our circumstances appear to share the unshaken solidity of the planet, and our security is complete. And then some undreamed-of antagonism assaults our life. We speak of it as a bolt from the blue! Perhaps it is some stunning disaster in business. Or perhaps death has leaped into our quiet meadows. Or perhaps some presumptuous sin has suddenly revealed its foul face in the life of one of our children. And we are "all at sea!" Our little, neat hypotheses crumple like withered leaves. Our accustomed roads are all broken up, our conventional ways of thinking and feeling; and the sure sequences on which we have

depended vanish in a night. It is experiences like these which make the soul cry out with the psalmist, in bewilderment and fear,—“My foot slippeth!” His customary foothold had given way. The ground was shaking beneath him. The foundations trembled.

And such seasons are known in a life of nations. An easy-going traditionalism can be overturned in a single blast. Conventional standards, which seemed to have the fixedness of the stars, are blown to the winds. Political and economic safeguards go down like wooden fences before an angry sea. The apparently solid structure begins to dissolve. The customary foundations of society are shaken. We must surely have had such experiences as these during the past few weeks and more especially during the last few days. What was unthinkable has become a commonplace. The impossible has happened. Our working assumptions are in ruins. Common securities have vanished. And on every side men and women are whispering the question,—Where are we? We are all staggered! And everywhere men and women, in their own way, are whispering the confession of the psalmist,—“My foot slippeth!”

Well, where are we? Amid all these violations of our ideals, and the quenching of our hopes, in this riot of barbarism and unutterable sorrow, where are we? Where can we find a footing? Where can we stay our souls? Where can we set our feet as upon solid rock? Amid the many things which are shaking what things are there which can-

not be shaken? I wish this morning to explore the Word of God, to recall one or two of these assurances in order that we may stay our souls upon them in the terrible strain and uncertainty through which we are passing, and in which we may have to live for many succeeding days.

"Things which cannot be shaken." Let us begin here: *The supremacy of spiritual forces cannot be shaken.* The obtrusive circumstances of the hour shriek against that creed. Spiritual forces seem to be overwhelmed. We are witnessing a perfect carnival of insensate materialism. The narratives which fill the columns of the daily press reek with the fierce spectacle of barbaric labor and achievement. And yet, in spite of all this appalling outrage upon the senses, we must steadily beware of becoming the victims of the apparent and the transient. Behind the unchartered riot there hides a power whose invisible energy is the real master of the field. The ocean can be lashed by the winds into indescribable fury, and the breakers may rise and fall in crashing weight and disaster; and yet behind and beneath all the wild phenomena there is a subtle, mystical force which is exerting its silent mastery even at the very height of the storm. We must discriminate between the phenomenal and the spiritual, between the event of the hour and the drift of the year, between the issue of a battle and the tendency of a campaign. All of which means that "While we look at the things which are seen, we are also to look at the things which are not seen." Well, look at them.

The power of truth can never be shaken. The force of disloyalty may have its hour of triumph, and treachery may march for a season to victory after victory; but all the while truth is secretly exercising her mastery, and in the long run the labor of falsehood will crumble into ruin. There is no permanent conquest for a lie. You can no more keep the truth interred than you could keep the Lord interred in Joseph's tomb. You cannot bury the truth, you cannot strangle her, you cannot even shake her! You may burn up the records of truth, but you cannot impair the truth itself! When the records are reduced to ashes truth shall walk abroad as an indestructible angel and minister of the Lord! "He shall give His angels charge over thee," and truth is one of His angels, and she cannot be destroyed.

There was a people in the olden days who sought to find security in falsehood, and to construct a sovereignty by the aid of broken covenants. Let me read to you their boasts as it is recorded by the prophet Isaiah: "We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement: when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us, for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves." And so they banished truth. But banished truth is not vanquished truth. Truth is never idle; she is ever active and ubiquitous, she is forever and forever our antagonist or our friend. "Therefore thus saith the Lord God . . . your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your

agreement with hell shall not stand: . . . and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding-place." Thus saith the Lord! We may silence a fort, but we cannot paralyze the truth. Amid all the material convulsions of the day the supremacy of truth remains unshaken. "The mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."

"Things which cannot be shaken!" What is there which cannot be shaken? *The passion of freedom* is a spiritual force which abides unshaken. The passion of freedom is one of the rarest of spiritual flames, and it cannot be quenched. Make your appeal to history. Again and again militarism has sought to crush it, but it has seemed to share the very life of God. Brutal inspirations have tried to smother it, but it has breathed an indestructible life. Study its energy in the historical records of this Book or in annals of a wider field. Study the passion of freedom amid the oppressions of Egypt, or in the captivity of Babylon, or in the servitude of Rome. How does the passion express itself? "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, and may my right hand forget her cunning!" Study it in the glowing pages of the history of this country, that breath of free aspiration which no power of armament, and no menace of material strength was ever able to destroy. The mightiest force in all those days was not the power of threat, and powder, and sword, but that breath of invincible aspiration which was the very breath of God. And

when we gaze upon stricken Belgium to-day, and look upon her sorrows, and her smitten fields, and her ruined cities, and her desolate homes, we can firmly and confidently proclaim that the breath of that divinely planted aspiration, her passion of freedom, will prove to be mightier than all the materialistic strength and all the prodigious armaments which seem to have laid her low. It is a reality which cannot be shaken.

There are other spiritual forces which we might have named, and which would have manifested the same incontestable supremacy: there is the energy of meekness, that spirit of docility which communes with the Almighty in hallowed and receptive awe: there is the boundless vitality of love which lives on through midnight after midnight, unfainting and unspent: there is the inexhaustible energy of faith which holds on and out amid the massed hostilities of all its foes. "And at midnight Paul and Silas sang praises unto God!" You cannot defeat spirits like these, you cannot crush and destroy them. You cannot hold them under, for their supremacy shares the holy sovereignty of the eternal God. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord;" and these spirits, the spirit of truth, the spirit of freedom, the spirit of meekness and love, are in fellowship with the divine Spirit, and therefore shall they remain unshaken.

Look again over the field of "things which cannot be shaken" amid all the boastful and callous materialism of our time, and consider this: *The*

law of moral retribution cannot be shaken. Whatever is happening just now on the Continent of Europe cannot for one moment abrogate or shake the eternal law that unrighteousness is rottenness, and that iniquity is disease. Nothing that is happening can bribe the nature of things and interfere with the dire and deadly sequence of cause and effect. And what is the law of moral retribution? It is this: "The wages of sin is death." Nothing can shatter that! By no possible human device or expedient, and by no brilliancy of momentary triumph can we cheat that law, and escape the long reach of its inevitable process. "The wages of sin is death." Not a death far-away removed, which allows a long interval of undisturbed vitality. The invasion of death is immediate. The entrance of death is coincident with the sin. This kind of death is not a final crisis, it is a present process, it is not a swift annihilation, it is a sure decay. When we sin our nobler powers at once begin to die, our nobler strength begins to waste. There is no escape from the sequence. "The wages of sin" is coma, callosity, benumbment, death. Every sinful deed houses its own nemesis, and the nemesis becomes active at once. Nay, we may give the statement a more piercing inwardness still. Every iniquitous thought and purpose harbors its own nemesis, its own hostile and destructive germ, a germ which proceeds to immediate consumption. When we sin something dies, the nobler man or woman shrinks and shrivels, and is despoiled of some of the forces

of vitality. That is the law of moral retribution. Study that law of retribution in the recorded history of King Saul. You can watch the gradual process of benumbment, like a creeping paralysis, stealing over the soul. Study that law in the tragedy of Macbeth. It would not be impertinent, from the standpoint of our present thought, to describe the entire narrative as the record of the dying of Macbeth. Or study the law in the wonderful pages of Richard III. In that great drama, as also in Macbeth, the outer activity increases as the inward vitality shrinks. Nay, now and again there are spasms, or even seasons, of seeming triumph, while all the time you can almost see the fell law at work, dismantling the soul, drying up its vital energies, and holding it in the clammy grip of inevitable and unbribable death. "The wages of sin is death:" amid all the tremblings and the uncertainties of life that law remains unshaken.

And the law applies, with equal inevitableness, to the individual and the nation. "The wages of sin is death." That is to say, in the corporate life of a nation unrighteousness is always associated with disease and decay. A nation can never remain intensely virile if she is in fellowship with wrong. There is an inward deterioration whatever flush of transient victory may rest upon her arms. Her conquests are only apparent, for she herself is the victim of a most awful and corroding defeat.

Brethren, on the continent of Europe to-day the law of moral retribution is at work. Our newspapers to-day record one form of death, and the

lists wring our hearts with the suggestion of immeasurable agony and woe. But there is another form of death, far more terrible than this, and of which our papers can give us no account—the wasting decay of national soul, a decay which is the wages of sin, the effects of the violation of the pure and holy law of God. It cannot be escaped. It is as inevitable as God. Sin is death: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. I find a steadying confidence in all this, and I quiet my own bewildered heart in its assurance. Our worship to-day is darkened with an appalling gloom. We cannot drive the darkness from our minds, and we ought not to do so if we could. It is our sacred duty to feel the heaviness of the pall, to be crushed before it, to let its chilling blackness fill every chamber of the soul. There are grave times when it is moral treachery even to wish to shake things off; when the only way to an enlightened and courageous action is to feel an occurrence upon the raw nerves, and upon the exposed and undefended heart.

I call you to witness that during the past eight months not a word has been spoken from this pulpit which could in the least degree tend to inflame the passions of war, or deepen and widen the gulf of misunderstanding and prejudice between peoples who are now at strife. I have sought for the wider view, and the larger truth, and the august aims and purposes of the Kingdom, in which we could all find inspiration and communion. I have remembered that I am an Englishman, and that I have in

the fellowship of this congregation men and women of German blood who are bound up with German ties and affections. I hold these friends in the dearest admiration and regard, and it is my happiness to believe that I enjoy their esteem and confidence. But here is a happening which pushes far beyond questions of racial frontier lines. It is not a restricted matter of nationality. It is a tremendous issue of common humanity, and for any pulpit to be silent on such an issue would be rank recreancy to the just and holy Lord. The sinking of the Lusitania, and sinking her without warning, and without giving any opportunity even for women and little children to escape, is a stupendous crime against our race and a colossal sin against our God. It is not manly and honorable warfare. It is foul and premeditated murder. It is not an advance into more chivalrous methods of struggle. It is a relapse into dark and savage barbarism! Two weeks ago there sat in this church, and worshipped with us, one of my people, a young mother, who sailed on this ill-fated liner. To-day two of her little ones, such wee ones, just the smallest span of years, are lost in the waste of waters. Men, how does that help the war, and what issue is advanced by outrages like these? It is altogether unthinkable, and in these supposedly enlightened and progressive days it seems to be so unreal that one half expects at any moment to awake as from a horrible dream. But the grim reality is here; it is here in weeping widows, and lonely little children, and cold and desolate homes. And in this house

of God, the house of a just and righteous God, I join with tens of thousands of my fellow-ministers in this country in execrating the terrible deed, and most fervently do I pray that a great wave of pure and purposeful and active indignation may sweep round the globe, and that even Germany herself may rise in stern and holy protest against the infamy which on Friday was perpetrated in her name.

Amid all the ruins of things which are being dissolved *the sovereignty of the Lord God remains unshaken*. Earth-born clouds may veil His throne, they cannot destroy His decrees. The heavy cloud of circumstance gathered about the life of the prophet Isaiah, and he walked in uncertainty and confusion, as though his Lord had been taken away. But "in the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord, high and lifted up!" Yes, but in the day of obscurity, before the robe of darkness was rent, the holy Lord was still there, and so were the cherubim, and the seraphim, and all the ministering angels of righteousness and grace. "The Lord cometh in the thick cloud!" When Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, and the American people were stunned by the blow, a vast crowd gathered in their bewilderment around the White House, and James Garfield came out upon the balcony of the house and cried aloud, in the words of an ancient Psalmist: "Clouds and darkness are round about Him, righteousness and judgment are the habitation of His throne."

Yes, we must distinguish between the earth-born clouds and the divine judgments, between the battle-

smoke and the great white throne. God's sovereignty may be hid, it can never be stayed or broken. This book of the Scriptures is a stormy book, stormy from end to end. And yet it reveals the sovereignty of God. The revelation of the sovereignty of God is not given only in green pastures, and in a balmy air, and under a blue and radiant sky. It is given amid social convulsions and upheavals, in the presence of menace and terror, amid the massed assemblies of material hosts. The revelation of His sovereignty is given when the pestilence is walking in darkness, and it is given when destruction is wasting at noonday. It is given when the hurricane is sweeping the land, and when all the watercourses have overflowed their banks. The Lord is revealed as King in the flood! I turn to the Book of Revelation. It is full of dread and appalling movement. Dragons and beasts are rising mysteriously out of the sea, and upon their heads is the name of blasphemy. Multitudes are worshipping the beast, and the earth is choked with abominations. But in the thick of all the fierce, rebellious movement, and in the very hey-day of unclean and hateful things, there is "the voice of a great multitude, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunders, saying, 'Hallelujah: for the Lord God omnipotent, reigneth!'"

Brethren, the sovereignty of the Lord God cannot be shaken. "God's in His heaven!" But the assurance of that sovereignty is not to lull us into laxity and ease. The revelation can be abused. It

can be used as a sedative by the indolent, when it is purposed to be a tonic for the faithful. I do not know any word which has been more perverted than Browning's great line: "God's in His Heaven! All's right with the world!" It has been frequently used as a lullaby, when it is intended to be a clarion. It has been proclaimed as an invitation to the green pastures and the still waters, when it is in reality a call to tread the steep and thorny ways of righteousness, and if need be to march fearlessly into the valley of the shadow of death. "God's in His heaven! All's right with the world!" That song of wandering little Pippa invaded the hell of the sensualist not with the ministry of light but of lightning. It smote the ears of one who was being betrayed to ignoble ease, and it recovered him to the stern uplands of a chivalrous crusade. It stole upon one who had become entangled in ways of treachery and dishonor, and he arose and freed himself from his toils. "God's in His heaven!" "The Lord reigneth!" Every man, then, to his duty, that with both hands and a consecrated soul he may whole-heartedly do the King's will.

"The Son of God goes forth to war,
A kingly crown to gain,
His blood-red banner streams afar.
Who follows in His train?"

The supremacy of spiritual force cannot be shaken. The law of moral retribution cannot be shaken. The holy sovereignty of the eternal God cannot be shaken. What then? Let us endow all our doings with the indestructible energy of recti-

tude. Let us make to ourselves friends of the law of moral retribution, and transform its processes into ministries of vital fellowship. Let us in all things "grow up into God," and seek the crown and consummation of life in perfected conformity to His will. And what shall be the strength and protectives of such a life? Even this: "Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night, nor for the arrow that flieth by day, for the pestilence that walketh in darkness, nor for the destruction that wasteth at noon-day." And what shall be the security of such a people? Even this: "God is our refuge and strength! . . . Therefore will we not fear though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be shaken into the heart of the seas. . . . God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved." "He that doeth these things shall never be moved." "Hallelujah, the Lord God omnipotent reigneth!"



